

PRESSBOOK

Bernard FRIZE

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Bernard Frize: the art of paradox

Interview by Yamina Benai

Two major exhibitions (Centre Pompidou, Galerie Perrotin) highlight the magnificent pictorial work of Bernard Frize, and his special place in the history of art. A conversation with the artist and with Michel Gauthier, curator at the Centre Pompidou.

L'OFFICIEL ART: The title of your exhibition, "Sans repentir", obviously evokes the artist's repentance with regard to gesture, but also his total adherence to the path that he chose to take. What was the intention behind this title?

MICHEL GAUTHIER: The polysemy of the title works well: repentance understood in its sense of moral or psychological value, but also in its belonging to the register of pictorial technique.

In the course of various interviews, you express the idea of making the most of artistic accidents, but also of "failures".

BERNARD FRIZE: I don't think that there are very many accidents.

MG: There is chance.

BF: There is chance but no accident, because if there were accidents, it would imply an absence of will.

MG: Some protocols incorporate randomness and chance, and the semantic field of the word "accident" contains the notion of randomness. On the other hand, I think you are pointing out something important in terms of the question of failure. Regarding Bernard Frize's painting, it is almost more interesting to evoke the notion of failure rather than that of accident. It is never a failure in the primary sense of the term, because it is a process assumed as such, but with regard to the rules of modern pictorial propriety, there are things that can be associated with failure. I'm thinking, for example, of the large canvas entitled *Pacifique*, with a motif on the canvas which is borrowed from...

BF: The movements of knights on the squares of a chessboard.

MG: Exactly, the brush has to follow the lines, tracing the shape of a pattern, but as the base is a little too damp, after a while the shape is diluted.

BF: This is the vanity of such activities. All of this does not have much value, it is all merely vanity.

What do you mean by "all of this"?

BF: Painting itself, painting protocols, the fact that one sets rules in order to structure a day, is not very valuable.

In that case, why continue?

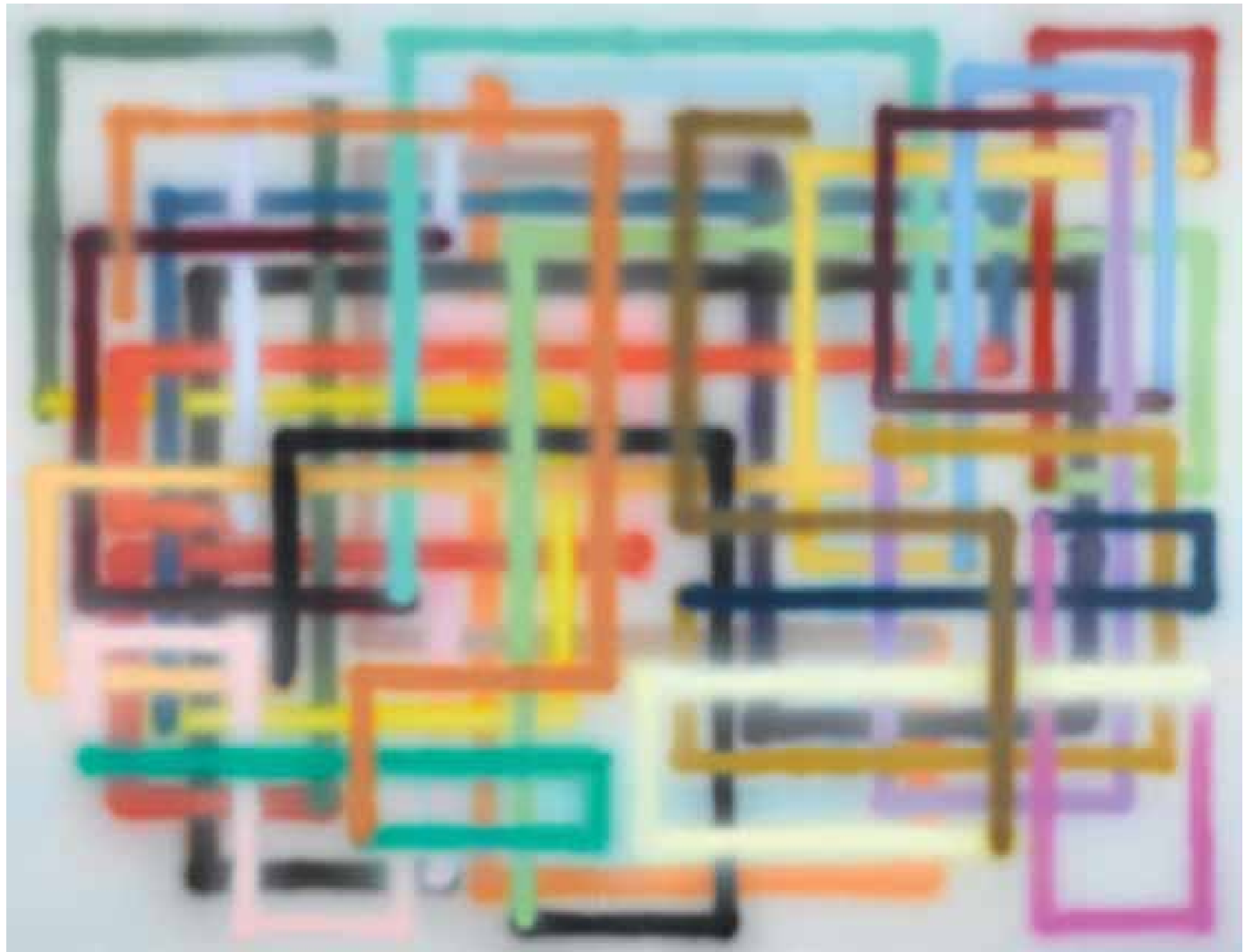
BF: Because one has to get up in the morning...

If we return to this notion of "failure", it's a term that you used in an interview with Jean-Pierre Criqui: "failed, in order to accentuate by way of the image this making use of the accident that I was trying to reach", you said.

BF: That was the past, you know: sometimes we say any old thing in the past...

But the past corresponds to a reality that you have not completely forgotten...

BF: Today I think that I am more determined, more willful, and that I let chance, accident or failure intervene less often at the wrong moments. Perhaps this notion of the accident will arise again... but at this moment I'm engaged in a different process.



Bernard Frize, *Oma*, 2007; acrylic on canvas; 240.5 x 310 cm; coll. Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris. Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Philippe Migeat/Dist. RMN-GP. © Bernard Frize and ADAGP, Paris, 2019.



Bernard Frize, *Suite Segond 120F*, 1980; alkyd-urethane lacquer on canvas; 130x195 cm; coll. Kunstmuseum Basel. Photo: Kunstmuseum Basel/Martin P. Bühler. © Bernard Frize and ADAGP, Paris, 2019.

How would you describe the construction of your path since the mid-1970s? What transitions, what linkages (a term that is dear to you) have contributed to the construction of your work?

BF: I think that there are two words that synthesize my work: generation and corruption. Making a thing and, in the same flux, making sure that this thing breaks down, and in undoing itself, that it finds some desire to create something new again. But at the end of the day, I have been doing the same thing since 1977. Don't ask me why, that's the way it is.

MG: Is corruption another word which we might evoke in order to describe what we were talking about before with the perhaps unsuitable term of "failure"?

BF: Yes, I think it is.

MG: Corruption may bring something into relief. Bernard Frize said today that this pair of generation/corruption at work in his poetics says something, but—and I don't know if you'll agree Bernard—I feel that there is something of a paradox in the work, and in a certain way in the strong and logical sense of the term. This may be one of the constants of Bernard Frize's work. When we start to get to know this work, we see that it is a painting with protocols in place, that all exploit some of painting's raw data. Then we become aware of the chemical dimension in some of the works. The work thus at first seems to belong to the sphere of a kind of pictorial materialism, which corresponds to the term generation, but in another sense of the word generation at the moment when Frize arrives on the artistic stage, and the results that he demonstrates, are not at all those that one could expect from painting within protocols. This is where I see a very strong paradox, and which seems to me—and I am here far from his own melancholy remarks—to constitute his historical position.

BF: It is certain that I have never been interested in images, unless they contain a contradiction, unless they undo themselves, or are ambiguous. This is why I find the polysemy of the title "Sans repentir" relevant: it is also what I wanted to put in place in each painting. That is to say that what we see is not necessarily what is there: there is a knot, and this knot must be difficult to undo. In reality, I paint knots.

MG: In this title there is also, I believe, the fact that in order to repent it is necessary, in some way, to have something like an aesthe-

tic superego, an ideological superego. What is interesting about Bernard Frize's painting is that he decided almost from the beginning not to have an aesthetic superego. There are thus pieces that can be magnificently beautiful, but which exploit a protocol that he has pre-determined, and of which they are the result. But there are also pieces that are almost embarrassing at the formal level, sometimes even a little curious, and he accepts them. It's in this tension between the splendor and sumptuousness of certain pieces and the aridity of others (that are almost aesthetically a little regressive) that the expression "Sans repentir" takes on its full meaning. Frize accepts both directions. This state of affairs interests me a lot.

How are the two exhibitions, that you devote to places as different as Perrotin and Pompidou, organized in terms of reflection and construction?

BF: For the exhibition at the Center Pompidou I really delegated the work... The curator came to my studio, she studied all my archives, then made her selection, that I approved. At Perrotin, I showed what I've done for the past two years, but it's not just one exhibition this year at the Perrotin galleries, but rather three—so it's quite different.

MG: The titles of the exhibited paintings underline Bernard Frize's contradictory side: Avec système, Sans système (*With system, Without system*).

BF: I think that the curator understood the motivations for my work, she captured them by repeating the same works in each room. We could thus return differently or in the same way with different works.

How does photography fit into your practice, and into your work overall?

BF: I am not at all a photographer, I would even say that I am very bad at it.

Nevertheless, you have taken photographs that have been published.

BF: I took pictures because it amused me. You know, the surface of my painting is always quite pre-photographed, always smooth. So I



Bernard Frize, *Rassemblement*, 2003; acrylic and resin on canvas; 215x340 cm; private coll. Photo: André Morin. © Bernard Frize and ADAGP, Paris, 2019.

wanted to make photographs that would give some information on what amuses me in painting. I thus mainly took "notes" with these photos.

MG: Technically and materially, photography implies a type of relationship to the real. Does the fact that you take pictures thus indicate something with regard to the relationship, that we may not see but which may be there, between your painting and reality?

BF: Of course, but this is something we see I think.

MG: But isn't it less obvious?

BF: Yes, I think there are many things that I paint that are inspired by folding a box, closing a box, buttering bread...

You once answered, in response to a question that tried to explore your relationship with the spectator, that you practice "painting which is loyal in its means, and loyal with regard to the spectator, who should not feel dominated by my paintings, that can be considered from the perspective of man-to-man".

BF: Yes, standing in front of each other, without any relationship of power or strength. For example, I never hang the paintings too high, I don't like it at all when they are too high, I like to hang them down low. Maximum 1m50, so that there is no relationship of domination, or ecstasy.

No allegiance of the spectator in front of the canvas?

BF: Precisely. And then loyal in its means because there is nothing hidden, everything is there, including the drawings, when I paint.

This relationship, to which you attach importance when faced with the canvas, once it is completed and up on the wall, the different gazes that will be applied to it...

BF: Yes, there is nothing hidden. No mystery, no magic.

No tours or detours?

MG: In some sense there are tours!

Reading the titles of your works, Avec système, Sans système, evokes the titles of certain works from Oulipo.

BF: That's what the curator pointed out to me. I am not only linked to my painting over the past forty years, but I have the feeling that I have also been bound over forty years to my era. There is a sort of overdetermination of one's life.

MG: What do you mean by the fact that you are linked to your era?

BF: To the era of the Oulipiens, but not intentionally. I have the impression more and more that I am linked to a time, maybe because I'm 70 years-old.

MG: What links your work closely to someone like Perec is the idea of the protocol.

BF: Yes, but I wouldn't like to see my work described too much as a painting of process or protocol, because I don't think that's entirely true. Because I need a good reason to get up in the morning, and I need to have a rule, but the main thing is not the rule, but rather the product. And all too often my work has been described as $a + b = c$, and I think that's too simple.

MG: I wouldn't say exactly the same thing as Bernard Frize, but at the same time I fully understand what he means. Maybe what I would say, in a very different way, is that there are protocols—we cannot avoid mentioning them when we talk about Frize's painting—but at the same time his very specific place in the history of protocol painting is completely aberrant, or completely other. Because what sets him apart from many of the protocol artists is that a painter with protocols generally sticks to his protocol. With Frize however, there isn't that idea at all. His protocols are many and varied, which gives him a highly singular position. There is also the fact that most protocol artists usually know the result, but in most cases Frize does not know at all what the painting will really produce when this protocol is applied.

BF: The protocol produces a paradoxical result.

MG: Absolutely, paradoxical is the word, and that's what I find so stimulating, it's my main point of entry into Bernard Frize's painting: the idea that the result is random.

Bernard Frize, "Sans repentir", until August 26, Centre Pompidou, Paris.
Bernard Frize, "Now or Never", until August 14, Galerie Perrotin, Paris.